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THE BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE—MAY 22, 1955 X—13

Afoot in Middlesex County With Willard de Lue

Wilmington's "Lady of Caskets," Who Had Beautiful Burial Cases Made in Cranberry House

WILMINGTON CENTER—Fifty-five years ago last Wednesday—May 18, 1900—the most publicized and enigmatic figure, Mrs. France Breazeale (or Breazeal) Hiller, famed through the nation as "the Lady of the Caskets."

Only some of the town's older residents will know all the details of her story—men and women who can recall events of the late 1800's, when Mrs. Hiller was having burial-cases of rich and strange beauty made in the cranberry-house back of her residence, which still is here in Main st.

Others in Wilmington will have read about her, for her memory has been kept alive in newspaper articles through the years, and also on the radio not long ago," said a man I met in Wildwood Cemetery, when I was looking for the tomb in which she rests with her husband, Dr. Henry Hiller, friends—for Henry Hiller, whose funeral was an extraordinary affair.

Almost anything that Mrs. Hiller did had its unusual aspects. Not long after Dr. Hiller's death and spectacular burial, Mrs. Hiller married a young Swede named Peter Sorrete, after he had legally assumed the name of his predecessor. Peter, now Henry Hiller Sr., is still a familiar figure around town, a genial, well-liked citizen, in his 80's.

"I saw him going by here not long ago," the man at Wildwood Cemetery said.

* * *

Wildwood is here at Wilmington Center, near the old white Congregational Church and the town hall, on the north side of Main st., the side or route of Church st., which leads in front the shopping area at the railroad station.

The former Hiller home is back there near the station—a big pale-yellow house, with a mansard roof, stains along its front and sides, and the Hiller name not deeply into the granite of its front steps. Nowadays it looks across Main st. to a building-supply place at the railroad station, not three or four and traffic rolls on its door.

* * *

But once you turn into Church st., Wilmington begins to take on a country-village aspect. It is a broad street, with trees on both sides, and as I came along it past the new fire station and the old Masonic Building (the Town house, owned by Mrs. Hiller, before Friendship Lodge bought it from her estate in 1956), I took note of the fact that much work is being done on it. Part of the marsh is now being drained and filled.

* * *

That marsh is also in back of the Hiller house, and in it Mrs. Hiller had a cranberry-house built around to be a profitable end. The cranberry-house of the eastern was across on the far side of Main near Middlesex av., which parallels Church st.

There at the corner is what is now the old town Common. Here were planting 1862 on it, and across the way a huge addition to the high school is nearing completion. Further along is the Unitarian church, and on the corner of Villanova road, wooden structure, which also had its place in the Hiller story. It seems to have been enlarged since it was built in 1867 as a chapel of a neighboring parish. In 1900 conversion to a church was in order, but it took a side vote.

Then comes Wildwood av., which runs off past a cemetery gate. Beyond continued along by the town cemetery, and entered Wildwood from Church st.

Now I'd understood that the tomb of the Hillers was buried under a great mound of earth, but I could see no mound, and the one I wanted wasn't there.

* * *

"It was leveled about 50 years ago," said one of the cemetery men. The tomb was rebuilt at that time, below ground level, and the stone was put flat, level with the ground, next to the gate," he said. The pole indicated was the Wildwood av. entrance.

* * *

What I saw was a flat, two beautiful granite corner each bearing the initial "H," and bronze plates at the foot of them. One plate bears the inscription, "Dr. Henry Hiller, born in Germany, Feb. 15th, 1845—died Nov. 15th, 1900." Much notice the Mrs. Hiller was a doctor, too.

I just stood there in the quiet of the place. "Here," I thought, "is the end of the Hiller story." It begins in Germany.

* * *

Dr. Henry Hiller and his wife had been living here in Wilmington for about 15 years when news would be traveled extensively, and, in fact, began to circulate that Mrs. Hiller had ordered construction of the cranberry-house in connection with which she here designs here in.

They were a well-liked couple in the Hiller community, it was thought, with his impressive, long-bearded dignity and her quiet, retiring manner, which, as one judge her to be, were friendly, and they showed an active interest in the town's well-being.

When Dr. Hiller came to Wilmington, and a Globe story at the time of his death, "there was little or no public spirit among my patients. He devoted himself with tireless energy to the improvement of the place, and was interested in every public project.

* * *

"His purse as well as his heart was always open, and, though of very quiet and retiring disposition, he labored over his time for the welfare of the town and the improvement of roads and schools, as shown literally to public and private needs. Scrupulous, public-spirited and energetic, his loss to the town is irreparable."

Mrs. Dr. Hiller also had done her part. She had contributed to various village projects, and had bought and renovated a number of somewhat run-down houses—thus improving both the tone and the sale, for she was a good business woman.

"A most remarkable woman," the Globe writer called her at the time of her husband's death. "Verging on 80 years of age" and possessed of a mind "as keen as a story she was then only 45" she impressed you with her strong individuality. Her active brain, into which are crowded a thorough knowledge of medicine, which she uses at work; and going daily to Boston to join her husband at the Mass. English & Navy, lecturing, which seems to have been his chief interest, and to which he has continued increasingly in Tremont Row, Bellay sq.

They made money, but how much nobody knew. Mrs. Dr. Hiller herself estimated the value of their secret million, but at other she sometimes spoke casually of the many children she had loved and lost—one time she mentioned fourteen were those in town who had died.

Pills are what the New England Medical Institute had to offer. They were widely advertised in the newspapers as being restorers of manly vigor and nurses of sexual health. The Hillers were closely associated in drawing-rooms.

* * *

"Hope," was the theme of his advertising, and the pills were soberly displayed. There was no secrecy about the pills, for the prescription for them was printed in full. You could have them made, the advertisement said, though I suspect some of the ingredients were rather costly. But to every corner drug-store, but to save you that trouble, a dollar would bring a package of 60 pills, and 25 six packages. His would fix you up.

* * *

Hiller came of Cape Cod stock, the story was, through by way of Germany. His great-grandfather had been a Capt. Jonathan Hiller of Wellfleet. But his grandfather was born in Berlin, and lived in Mannheim, Germany, home of paternal ancestors. There Dr. Hiller was born.

After he received his medical degree at Gottingen (as the story

Mrs. Joan M. Black Elected I.O.O.F. Provincial Grand Lady

Mrs. Joan M. Black elected to the office of Provincial Grand Lady of the Manufacturing sub-district of the Independent Order of Odd

MRS. JOAN M. BLACK

Fellows, Manchester Unity at the 28th annual convention held in the Masonic Temple, Fall River.

Mrs. Joan M. Black was noble grand of Mystic Lodge of Wilmington in 1951 and 1952, and served as district deputy of the following lodges: Pride of Thistle of Somerville, Victoria Lodge of Lowell, and Lincoln Lodge of Lawrence. At present she holds the office of treasurer of Aletha Washington Lodge of Malden.

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